

# JOHN DUNS SCOTUS AND THE IMMORTALITY OF THE SOUL

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Duns Scotus, the most famous Master of what is known as the Franciscan School, has passed into posterity as a symbol of contradiction. While some exalt his christian virtues even to the point of having him raised to the honors of the altar, sainthood; others deny him having the most elementary christian virtue. Others admired in him the strength of a privileged intelligence and saw him as a sure and unquestionable Master; others persisted in finding adventurous theories or speculations in his doctrines which jeopardize his orthodoxy. However, it is in dealing with the soul where, among other points, he sustains that it is not possible to demonstrate its immortality, based solely on the arguments of reason, that his theories are emphatically questionable.

His opinions on the plurality of forms in the soul's formation, on the formal distinctions between the faculties (which certainly do not coincide with the doctrines of Aristotle and the points of view of the great Master, Thomas Aquinas) have been hit hard by his opponents. However, none of his opinions has appeared as scandalous as that which I have just mentioned, viz, that it is impossible to verify the immortality of the soul by pure reason alone. Some, of course, were swift to find in this opinion an openly heterodox or misbelieving conception, as if, in reality, he did not believe in the immortality of the soul.

If we were to analyze all of Scotus' opinions regarding the soul, we would lose ourselves in unnecessary explanations. Let us deal with one of his opinions in a schematic and synthetical way.

Scotus refers to the problem of the soul's immortality in his *Ordinatio* (book IV dist. 43) and in his *Reportatio* in which, referring to the future resurrection and universal judgment, he puts the question: «Utrum posset esse per se notum per rationem resu-

rectionem hominum naturalem esse futuram». At once, it must be admitted, the evangelical account to him served as a pretence to ask this question which greatly interested him and of which he wishes to express his thoughts with all clarity.

In asking the question «Is it possible to prove the immortality of the soul by pure reason?», he was not denying the fact of immortality, nor denying to reason the capacity to find arguments to make this truth, received from Revelation, probable. His words are these:

«Potest dici quod licet ad propositionem probandam sint rationes probabiles, non tamen demonstrativae, immo nec necessariae»<sup>1</sup>.

In confirming this truth received by Revelation, human reason has many valid arguments to prove immortality, although without arriving at a verification.

Although in the presentation of his thought, proof is shown of his keen and sharp mind, exhibiting reasons which, at times, have been qualified as harshly critical, nevertheless, his thought shows an intimate cohesion with the Franciscan School which, in the middle of pure reason's aridity, allows a sentiment such as follows, to escape,

«Ex his apparet quanta sint gratiae referendae misericordiae Creatoris, qui nos per fidem certissimos reddidit in his quae pertinent ad finem nostrum et ad perpetuitatem sempiternam»<sup>2</sup>.

In making such a confession, he is but following the strict line of the School to which he belonged, showing his cohesion with those principles which serve as an inspiration to his enquiries. Noting those principles, we pass to the first point.

### I. - WEAKNESS OF THE ARGUMENTS BY WHICH ONE WISHES TO VERIFY IMMORTALITY

Conforming himself to the method of presenting theses of that period, Scotus puts before the eyes of his followers various arguments which are ordinarily or commonly used to prove the immor-

<sup>1</sup> *Ord.* IV d. 43 q. 2 n. 16 (ed. VIVÈS XX 46a).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* n. 33 (p. 59b).

ality of the soul. After presenting these, he criticized each one, proving their insufficiency. Let us mention some of these arguments and their corresponding criticism:

*A. - The soul is immaterial, therefore it is immortal*

This is one of the most valid arguments used to make evident immortality. That the soul is immaterial is unquestionable. The capacity of the intellect's reflections, the abstractive power of reason, the power of free will (which must not be identified with the natural inclination of the sensitive appetite), these are forcible proof that the principle from which they proceed, is immaterial:

«Habemus in nobis aliquam cognitionem obiecti sub aliqua ratione sub qua non potest esse actus eius aliqua cognitio sensitiva; ergo etc. Antecedens probatur, quia experimur in nobis quod cognoscimus actu universale; experimur enim quod cognoscimus ens vel qualitatem sub ratione aliqua communiore quam sit ratio primi obiecti sensibilis, etiam respectu supremæ sensitivæ...; experimur denique quod cognoscimus ignotum ex noto per discursum»<sup>3</sup>.

«Ex secunda operatione humana, scilicet voluntate, potest probari idem, quia homo est dominus suorum actuum... Illa autem indeterminatio non potest poni in aliquo appetitu organico vel extenso...»<sup>4</sup>.

This reasoning is simple and clear. If the soul's operations (faculties) are immaterial, the principle from which they proceed, the human soul, is immaterial. «Operatio sequitur esse», says the philosopher and, in this case, the maxim has perfect application. Moreover, this immateriality, both of operation and of the faculty which produces it, brings us to another conclusion. This immaterial principle cannot be the product of matter as happens in the generation of this world's things; the vegetative and sensitive life strictly proceed from similar anterior elements. We cannot admit the same process of an immaterial being, that which produces it cannot be matter, but something distinct from this world of matter. In other words, the human soul, which is distinct and superior to matter, cannot be the product of organic process from which all material things begin, but the effect of a superior will. With

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* n. 10 (p. 40ab).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* n. 12 (p. 43a).

this Aristotelian reasoning, the concept of creation is almost attained. Although Aristotle disregarded the fact of creation and never gave it an exact definition nevertheless, in giving an origin of this nature to the soul, its intrinsic incapacity to die was admitted, that is to say, the immortality of the soul was logically being proved. Let us quote Scotus' words which refer to this argument, the strongest to prove immortality:

«Ergo [intellectus] non accipit esse per generationem, sed a causa extrinseca; nec per consequens potest accipere non-esse per corruptionem nec per aliquam causam corruptivam, quia eius esse non subest alicui tali causae, cum sit a causa superiore immediate»<sup>5</sup>.

From what has been said, the force of the refuting argument is certainly shaken. As is seen, immortality is not deduced from immateriality alone, but also from an intrinsic capacity that a being which has not been produced by a material operation, can destroy itself, ceasing to be a being. The immaterial being is, by its nature, incorruptable and so, as a logical conclusion, is also immortal. This is what had to be proved and is proved by natural reason.

Using all the force of this argument, we note that, in the background, this argument is based on a simple «*petitio principii*», that is to say, to presume what has to be proved. Effectively, it is not true that immortality must be a necessary consequence of immateriality, unless it is admitted that every immaterial being is also necessary. If we deal with a contingent being such as the human soul, that which is author of that which begins to be, can also be author of its ceasing to be.

The same contingency of being is a proof that it can cease to be, for this reason and from this point of view it cannot be proved that the human soul is immortal.

On the other hand, according to the doctrine of Aristotle, the human soul is a form of composition or composite; man is composed of soul and body; the body is matter, destructible, corruptible and dies; the soul is immaterial and remains in its existence. But if the soul is a form of composite, it must follow its nature, that is to say it must be destructible or, as our thinker says:

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* n. 13 (p. 44b).



«Intellectus corrumpitur in nobis quodam interiore corrupto; et hoc pro tanto, quia poneretur principium ipsi toti composito operandi operationem propriam eius; sed compositum est corruptibile; ergo et principium operativum eius»<sup>6</sup>.

In conclusion, this argument, strictly in the order of philosophy, is not sufficient to make evident the immortality of the soul.

### B. - *The desire for immortality*

Another argument, of a different nature, invoked to verify the immortality of the soul, is founded in the natural universal desire, intimate to every human being, towards immortality. The soul not only has a tendency but also a necessity to prolong its existence forever. The human being has a fear of death, that is to say, every human being has an inclination to immortality. Well then, if this tendency is universal, if it is so intimate and spontaneous, it follows that it must have some correspondence, some relationship with reality. Otherwise, it would merely be a jest of nature, having neither sense nor explanation.

According to Scotus, this argument is also subject to a simple *petitio principii*; that which must be proved is exactly that this desire, which is indefinite and expressionless, must have a relationship or intercourse with reality. An elicited act, as he says, is not dealt with, but simply a simple inclination which, in no way, can be a basis for a strictly philosophical argument:

«Aut arguitur praecise de desiderio naturali proprie dicto, et illud non est aliquis actus elicited, sed sola inclinatio naturae ad aliquid; et tunc planum est quod non potest probari desiderium naturale ad aliquid nisi primo probetur possibilitas in natura ad illud; et per consequens, e converso arguendo, est petitio principii. Aut arguendo de desiderio naturali minus proprie dicto, quod scilicet est actus elicited, sed concorditer inclinationi naturali, tunc iterum non potest probari quod aliquod desiderium elicited sit naturale illo modo, nisi prius probetur quod ad idem sit desiderium naturale primo modo»<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. n. 17 (p. 47a).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. n. 29 (p. 57b).

### C. - *The argument of authority*

The thesis to demonstrate the immortality of the soul has yet another argument which Scotus confronted decisively: the argument of authority. It is undoubtable, the supporters of this theory say, that Aristotle, solely basing himself on the terminology of his own system arrived at the conclusion that the soul is immortal. This assertion is found in various passages of the Stagirite. If, they concluded, the same philosopher arrived at a belief in the immortality of the soul, without the help of Revelation, it is exactly because the proofs which he used are sufficiently strong to create a conviction of this kind. The conclusion is obvious. The immortality of the soul can be philosophically proved.

Scotus replies to this argument with much moderation and safety. He replied, thus:

In the first place, it is not absolutely certain that Aristotle had admitted the immortality of the soul as an incontrovertible truth. Certainly there are passages in his works in which he admitted the immortality of the soul, passages in which he defended this theory, but there are also passages in which the contrary is proved. The true position of Aristotle is uncertain. It is most probable that he had not a profound conviction as regards the immortality of the soul. If scattered affirmations of the immortality, of the soul are found in his writings, this is due, according to Scotus, to the fact that philosophers also, at times, put forward propositions without proving them, as reflections of the beliefs of the times in which they lived or as recollections of certain beliefs which form a certain spiritual patrimony of humanity.

Although in the case of philosophers who purposely and concretely establish their opinions on the immortality of the soul, it does not follow that the thesis is absolutely proven. Everything philosophers say is not always provable:

«Unde non oportet quod omne illud quod dicit Philosophus sit demonstratio, quia multa dixerunt philosophi quae acceperunt a prioribus philosophis, persuasi per rationes probabiles eorum, et non semper demonstrativas»<sup>8</sup>.

However, one must guard against exaggeration. When it is affirmed that it is not possible to prove the immortality of the soul, the fact cannot be denied that the human mind can find arguments which justify a forceful probability. Although proof of the immortality of the soul can be reached, that which simply cannot be done, is to verify it.

If it is true that the philosopher has supported the immortality of the soul, if it is also true that he has presented some arguments to prove this assertion, it must be said that, with bases more or less propable, their arguments have found justification in opinions; but it does not follow that any of them has possessed proof, as evidence seeks to extricate him from the extrinsic nature of concept and to be a logical consequence of terminology.

The force of all this argument has a common denominator. Philosophy as such has not the proper concepts to reach a conclusion with precise logic. In other words, a fact or truth which explains all, is unknown to philosophy. In theological language, there is a concept which explains and illustrates the problem of the immortality of the soul, the concept of creation. Man's soul has not been simply a pre-ordained consequence of composition or composite, but is a product of God's will which created it. He infused the soul into the human body and gave it qualities superior to all other forms. This is the key to the whole question of immortality, creation:

«Numquam invenitur a Philosopho, quod ipse asserat animam intellectivam esse ab extrinseco»<sup>9</sup>.

Without this prior principle, all others are useless. From there, in conclusion, it follows that it is not possible to verify the immortality of the soul. The certain fact of creation does give a sure and positive basis to speak on immortality, and it is precisely this of which Aristotle was ignorant, as is the case of all those who elaborate the science of things based solely on reason. Putting forward the fact of creation clarifies everything, but the fact of creation comes to us from Revelation and so arises all the consequences.

## II. - THE MEANING AND SCOPE OF SCOTUS' PROPOSITIONS

We do not think it necessary to continue insisting on new arguments to present Scotus' authentic position in its clear and precise way. It has been sufficiently proved that Scotus defended the opinion that the immortality of the soul cannot be verified philosophically. It remains to ask ourselves: why did Scotus arrive at this conclusion? Had he his own theory on the soul in which he presented his own conception? What connection has his opinion with the principles of the Franciscan School? Let us briefly examine these points:

Although it appears paradoxical and contradictory, the truth is, according to our humble opinion, that Scotus neither in the thesis with which we deal, nor in other similar theses, presents us with a philosophical system nor a personal and complete study of the soul. Undoubtedly Thomas Aquinas did this. He presented a complete study of the soul; he had the earnestness to do so. For the same reason, Thomas Aquinas' each and every affirmation and proposition, although more often than not, presented in the short formulas of his times, are less comprehensible to-day. But the fact remains that he presents to his disciples a full study of the soul. His opinions follow a plan; a logical process gives a constancy to his whole system and a list of questions makes this study something complete and a direction for teaching. Scotus did not present a system of this kind. Although many of his followers wished to systematize his observations and points of view, the truth is no proper and elaborate doctrine for use by his followers was expressly presented. This can be said about the question under discussion, the immortality of the soul.

Scotus had no intention of presenting his deliberations for the consideration of his contemporaries, nor did he wish to teach his thesis that the immortality of the soul cannot be verified. Nevertheless, Scotus stated his thesis with all clarity, he repeated it various times, although it resulted more as an irrenouncable position of his initial point of view. To prove the immortality of the soul does not essentially interest him, but he was interested in arguing that such immortality cannot be verified; such discussion would prove frivolous were it not pedantic and dangerous to



others. In fact, many were fearful simply at knowing that Scotus had defended this thesis. It was the result of discourteous accusations against him. Nevertheless, his liberal point of view is much more simple than what is thought. We speak of this in the following paragraph.

Scotus would be inexplicable if we were to suppose that his intention is not superior to mere criticism und casuistry. His whole position is purely apologetic. All the force of his amazing intelligence is but an instrument in a cause which found itself in danger by certain innovations of his time.

As a symbol of the times, a powerful philosophical tendency arose to express christian doctrine in terms of pagan learning. There are those who think that the best service that can be rendered to truth is to translate it into the established terms of the times, as an expression of human science raised to the highest pinnacle of perfection. Thomas Aquinas shared this opinion and undertook the task of defending it. His clear intelligence and vast intellect were put to the service of this proposition.

This adaptation of the divine message (revelation) to science and philosophy offers a more systematic presentation of truth; it is one of the noblest endeavours to discover conformity between science and and faith, and to prove that faith, being one, can express itself in identical language, be it through the channels of patient and laborious investigation, be it through direct communication of God with man, Revelation.

For a considerable group of thinkers of that period, especially for the thinkers of the Franciscan School, this noble and gigantic experiment appeared dangerous; in the first place because the scope of revealed truth surpassed that truth conquered by investigation and, in the second place, because the terms themselves by which human science was expressed, were inadequate and there existed the danger that with too much harmony between science and faith the latter would rationalize itself, creating scepticism and losing that force which is founded in the free determination of man who accepts revelation as coming from God Who cannot deceive nor be deceived.

In this sense, the thinkers of the Franciscan School felt obliged to denounce and rule out the opinions which resulted in the

fusion of science and faith. And so, by a second paradox, the easier it is to accept Divine Truth, the most difficult it is to detect the hidden errors in the magic formulas of scientific terminology. So arises a new concept, a *Weltanschauung* which, without having proposed a plan of action, gradually constructs a new system of propositions and declarations, resulting in the logical consequences of its points of view. These consequences invade all fields of knowledge, metaphysics, theodicy, cosmogony, psychology etc. Consequences of this kind are, among others, those pressed in the theses on univocity of being, identity of essence and existence, the notion of potency and act, the plurality of forms, formal distinctions, etc. The theses are endless. It is not closed system which presents itself in a logical structure but the inspiration of a principle which discovers new and new points of view. So, within this school, guarding absolute similarity of thought, each one of its thinkers may present new points of view, formulate new conclusions and theses.

Such is exactly the case of John Duns Scotus, and it is precisely in this scheme that the possibility of making evident the immortality of the soul was conceived and that his thought and personality are discovered with all their brilliance. With absolute cohesion to the School to which he belonged, he shared a principle. He believed in the immortality of the soul simply because God revealed it. That was sufficient. Furthermore, human reason can find solid arguments to prove this truth, it even may be said that the probatory arguments are greater than those of the same human reason which are used to deny this truth. That which cannot be said, in any form, is that such truth can be proven intrinsically, by its own nature.

Aristotle could have believed in immortality and could have put forward arguments to defend this point of view, and he could have held an opinion; however, it does not follow that the arguments he presented have adequate emphasis to give an unimpeachable value to his argumentation. For this reason, if an opinion arises on such arguments there is danger that another philosopher may arrive at the opposite, that is, arrive at a negation of the thesis.

For Scotus the road is more simple. Avoiding this explanation, without mixing divine science with the human, he puts Divine

Revelation on an unaffected basis. This is an unimpeachable argument and gives the human argument its relative value. So, there were no surprises of any kind. In this way, the enthusiasm of human dialectics is finished with: the severity of verification.

It would require something like an electronic brain, which minutely examines the smallest details, to establish the probatory value of every argument and excludes possible mistakes. And, in reality, it would be interesting to know if all data and all the conclusion of declarations, with their genuine meaning, were given to one of these apparatuses would the conclusions of the electronic brain be exactly the same as that arrived by at the Doctor Subtilis with the efficiency of his own intellect. It is not possible for the arguments to arrive at a judicious proof in the terminology which serves for its declaration.

Other philosophers of the same school, also examining the situation, have arrived at the same conclusion, but the glory of having accomplished the decisive step in an unsurmountable form, belongs to Scotus. Through this, the sagacity of his intellect is seen, but, at the same time, his connection with the school to which he belonged. Because of the superior efficiency of his analysis and decisiveness, he became a great leader, a true Master and guide.

In conclusion, as we have already said, the thesis regarding the impossibility of verifying the immortality of the soul is that which clearly gave the greatest worry to the Franciscan thinkers and that which sheds all the necessary light for the exact understanding of the Franciscan School.